# Armenia: Poverty, Transition & Democracy

A Collection of Articles and Photographs by **Onnik Krikorian**

Gomidas Institute
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In Autumn 2003, the Armenian Government declared its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) to reduce poverty in Armenia to 20% by 2015. This is a major undertaking that merits serious attention and forms the backdrop to this book.

Through articles and photographs, the author shares his insights through experience gained working with international organizations and NGOs operating in the Republic as well as through his every-day interaction with ordinary citizens of the Republic of Armenia.

In this book, Krikorian covers issues as diverse as socially vulnerable families living in Yerevan, the Armenian capital, to the danger of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and landmines in the self-declared Republic of Nagorno Karabagh. Other related issues include the democraticization process after the "Rose Revolution" in neighboring Georgia.

About the Author:

After two trips to Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh in 1994 and 1998, Krikorian relocated to Yerevan at the end of 1998 to work for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Later, he embarked on a freelance journalist career which included working as a stringer for the US-based *Fox News*, the Czech-based *Transitions Online* and the Boston-based *Armenian Weekly* newspaper.

Krikorian has also written and photographed for the *United Nation's Children Fund (UNICEF)*, *Médecins Sans Frontières (France)*, *Transitions Online*, *New Internationalist*, *Fox News*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, *The Los Angeles Times*, as well as *HETQ Online*, *Armenian Forum*, *The Armenian Weekly* and others.

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Cover Photograph: Agarak, Aragatsotn Region, Republic of Armenia

# Introduction

**This book is a poignant account of abject poverty in Armenia and full of concrete examples of people fighting for their physical existence with little chance of a better life in the foreseeable future. By researching the plight of such people, the author gives readers valuable insights into the most underprivileged and downtrodden stratum of Armenia's population that rarely attracts the attention of local and foreign media.**

Their day-to-day lives represent the most extreme manifestation of the country's post-Soviet poverty that remains widespread despite nearly a decade of economic growth that has raised income disparity and social polarization to unprecedented levels. The highly uneven distribution of the benefits of economic growth has, among other things, precluded a sizable increase in public spending that could have alleviated the problems facing the people described in this book.

The Armenian government's current annual budget of less than $600 million is thus too small to flesh out its existing social security net. Despite reporting a record-high 13.9 percent rate of economic expansion in 2003, the government collected taxes and import duties worth only 15 percent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product. That proportion is very low even by ex-Soviet standards, not to mention in developed Western economies where it could be as high as 50 percent. All of this suggests that the state coffers should have been filled with hundreds of millions of dollars in additional revenues each year.

This represents the failure of the Government to tackle endemic tax evasion by the rich in earnest. According to official statistics, for example, the share of corporate profit tax in the overall tax revenues has steadily declined over the past decade. Furthermore, the dollar equivalent of profit taxes collected by the government in 2003 was below that recorded in 1996, meaning that much of the additional wealth generated by the Armenian economy has not been taxed.

As long as this remains the case, there will be no imminent way out of the cycle of misery highlighted here.

**Emil Danielian,**
Journalist - Analyst, Yerevan, Republic of Armenia

# An Underclass emerges in post-soviet Armenia

**YEREVAN, Armenia — For many visitors to Armenia, the center of the capital resembles almost any other city in Europe. As in Baku and Tbilisi, new hotels, restaurants and boutiques have sprung up where once stood communal markets and gray, drab shops selling wares that the majority could afford.**

But travel just ten minutes from the city center and it's as if you've entered another world. Roads have deteriorated, buildings are in disrepair and some have even collapsed. And although the center of the city is illuminated by hundreds of neon signs and billboards when the sun goes down, the rest of the capital instead descends into darkness. Poverty is widespread.

According to official government statistics, nearly half the population lives below the national poverty line with thirteen percent living in extreme poverty. In 2002, salaries averaged just $50 a month while pensions were even lower at $10. According to the National Statistics Service of the Republic of Armenia, seventy percent of the population lives on a staple diet of bread, potatoes and macaroni.

As a result, the United Nations concludes that the issue of survival is still vital for many Armenians.

*"When we talk about poverty in Armenia,"* says Ashot Yesaian, First Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Social Security, *"we are talking about people who cannot even afford to eat. Among potential claimants [for social benefits] are families with young children who have no money for even bread."*

**Living on the Edge**

In a small room of a derelict house situated in Agarak, half an hour away from Yerevan, one such family burns plastic and rubber to stay warm during the winter months. The walls of the room should be white but, like the three children that resemble paupers from a Dickensian novel, they are black and covered in soot.

A social worker stands calmly as the children's uncle articulates his anger. The Government's National Commission for Minors has decided that the children must be removed for

their own safety and placed in a Children's Home. An international organization has been called in to do the dirty work for them.

Without the children, the family will find it impossible to survive. Every day, they beg for scraps and change in the nearby village. Faced with the prospect of his only source of income being taken away, the uncle waves a knife in the air before emotion finally overcomes him. His legs give way and he collapses into a heap on the floor.

Families like this are representative of the poorest of the poor in Armenia. They are unable to feed or clothe themselves; their children rarely attend school and in some cases, are not even officially registered as having been born. With no official documents, they are unable to receive social benefits or medical assistance.

An underclass is forming in Armenia, a world away from the image that the Government would like to portray to its large and influential Diaspora. It is, however, one closer to the reality than that depicted in a hundred coffee-table books and postcards of monasteries and churches photographed against scenic landscapes.

Some even rationalize the situation by arguing that conditions are only bad in the regions of the Republic but there are just as serious concerns with poverty in the cities. In fact, the United Nations considers that urban poverty can be far more desperate than that which faces villagers who can at least live off the land.

In Erebuni, one of the capital's poorest residential districts, approximately two hundred families inhabit a dilapidated hostel complex that once accommodated workers from the nearby chemical factory. The condition of the building should be enough to raise alarm in most civilized countries but the local council says that it is none of their concern. There are no windows left on the stairwell now exposed to the elements, and the elevators no longer work after residents cannibalized their innards long ago.

A four year old child pushed another on this stairwell last summer and one and half year old Isabella fell through a hole in the railings seven floors to her death. Her mother, Yevgenia, shrugs off her loss although from time to time, tears still swell in her eyes when she remembers.

Yevgenia has four other children to bring up in two tiny rooms furnished only by three rusting, metal bed frames and a divan covered with rags that serve as bedclothes.

They've lived in this apartment for over a decade now and don't even have running water. Her children instead collect water from those more fortunate living below.

Now, her children no longer beg on the streets after Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) included them in their Prevention program but that is not to say that their situation has improved. Somewhat ironically, although most of the inhabitants of the hostel are living in abject poverty, only two fall within the remit of the international medical organization.

*"I agree that many families in this building live in very difficult conditions,"* admits Samuel Hanryon, MSF's former Country Director, *"but their situation is not the same. For example, we can only work with two of these families because there is a problem with violence. The needs are enormous in Armenia but we are not the Government..."*

Which is probably just as well.

Across the road, two former officials have erected large and opulent mansions, an arrogant display of wealth to contrast against the extreme poverty opposite.

**Children in a Difficult Situation**

Two floors up, a father of six removes copper wire from electrical appliances and automobile parts to sell for a few hundred drams. Like Yevgenia, Hampartsum Grigorian's family is also included in MSF's Prevention Program but their situation could be considered even worse.

Hampartsum's only son is in prison for theft after he stole in order to buy food for the family but unlike those in government who are believed to have stolen significantly more, the courts threw the book at him. Recently, Hampartsum's son wrote a letter to his father. He can be released from prison if he pays $100. For Hampartsum, however, it might as well be $100,000.

Last September, his daughter, Gohar, became the face on hundreds of posters that were displayed throughout Yerevan highlighting the plight of vulnerable children in Armenia. *"I want to live with my family,"* read the poster. Now, Gohar and two of her four sisters are temporarily residing in a Children's Home in Gyumri.

And to make matters worse, Hampartsum's eldest daughter lives with her grandmother, unwilling to tolerate her father's drinking. When Hampartsum was supplied with a bag of cement to fix up his apartment he allegedly sold it in order to

buy vodka. In and out of hospital for alcoholism, when he drinks, he beats his wife.

But Hampartsum is not a bad man; it's just that times are hard. His wife found work in a local kiosk but left after three days when the owner refused to pay her the 3,000 drams ($6) she was owed. Meanwhile both Margarita and her husband can't even scrape 500 drams together to pay for the photographs required for their passport applications.

They're not planning to leave the country, of course; just that they need some official papers to receive benefits and other assistance.

Still, they have it better than others. On the ground floor, an extended family of fourteen inhabits a tiny room that can barely accommodate two. Along the corridor, water gushes from the communal toilet and the washroom, seeping into the floor. Last year, according to the residents and since confirmed by the local authorities, at least two people died of tuberculosis on the ground floor alone.

MSF admit that tuberculosis is fast becoming a cause for concern in Armenia. *"The problem is a serious issue, especially with regards to Multi Drug Resistant (MDR) Tuberculosis in Yerevan,"* says Hanryon. *"Nowadays, anyone suffering from MDR in Armenia is sentenced to death."*

But although journalists, international organizations and film crews visit the families living in this hostel on a regular basis and seemingly with good intentions, everyone complains that nothing changes.

Perhaps they have a point.

Although the Armenian Government finalized its long awaited Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in August 2003, it will take until 2015 before poverty in Armenia is reduced to the post-earthquake 1989 level of twenty percent. But at least the World Bank and the United Nations consider that such goals are achievable.

Key to the success of the PRSP will be increasing social benefits and salaries while waging an effective struggle against endemic corruption and a shadow economy that by some estimates accounts for the lion's share of all business in the Republic.

# The Garbage Dump has become a way of life

On Yerevan's Achapniak Municipal Landfill, families scavenge for anything that they can sell. Children collect old bottles for their mothers to wash and sell instead of attending school, and families collect anything that can be burnt as fuel in the winter months. Their situation is not unique. Families scavenging off municipal landfills can be found throughout the country.


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# Suffer the Children

**YEREVAN, Armenia — A mother waits patiently to enroll her son at an Auxiliary Boarding School for children with learning disabilities somewhere in the heart of the Armenian capital. It doesn't seem to matter to the staff that the twelve-year old isn't disabled, all the school requires, the Director says, is a medical certificate.**

But, with salaries low in the medical sector, many doctors are all too willing to provide fake diagnosis to parents wishing to enroll their children into residential institutions. In fact, Dennis Loze, Project Coordinator for Mission East's Mosaic Program in Armenia says that 85% of children already residing in Auxiliary Boarding Schools are falsely diagnosed.

*"They are accepting children with no problem whatsoever because parents cannot afford to clothe and feed them,"* he says, adding that Mission East had to literally fight to have three children with Down's syndrome admitted into one boarding school after being told by the Director that she now only accommodated 'normal' children.

Suspicions that this was not the case were later confirmed by the Ministry of Education and Science. However, so serious is the problem that the Armenian Government has started to address the issue in a national program of actions targeted towards the protection of children's rights, including reform of the admission system.

*"With the declining level of services in residential institutions, the current trend is creating an underclass of children marked by poverty, stigmatization and a lack of proper care and education who are likely to lack opportunity as adults,"* writes Aleksandra Posarac and Jjalte Sederlof in the World Bank's Armenian Child Welfare Note for June 2002.

"*To the extent that such children end up in institutions for the mentally disabled which offer only a special education syllabus for children with mental disability,"* they continue, *"their development will be seriously hampered by the lack of educational opportunities."*

## Poverty

Boarding Schools were established during the soviet era for children with developmental, physical and emotional disabilities and while a 1985 Soviet Decree permitted the admission of children from vulnerable families into Secondary Boarding Schools, Auxiliary Boarding Schools were only meant to cater for children with specific medical or psychological needs.

But, with a sizeable proportion of the population living below the poverty line, many families are increasingly looking to residential institutions to provide what the First Deputy Minister of Social Security, Ashot Yesaian, calls *"the primary 'social safety-net' for their children."*

Official statistics report that just under half of the population live below the national poverty level — 13% of which live in extreme poverty — but according to the ARKA Financial and Economic News Agency in Yerevan, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) suggests that the figure might reach 80% if other international measures for assessing social vulnerability are used.

*"Children are removed from their families as the only alternative to remaining hungry,"* says Nicholas McCoy, the author of a

report on the situation of children in residential care in Armenia. *"Even if that means committing them to a residential institution or sending them out onto the streets to work, research shows that vulnerable children are not necessarily the victims of earthquake and war but come primarily from economically deprived families."*

As a result, approximately 12,000 children are now enrolled into residential intitutions in Armenia according to the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank. However, because many schools compensate for shortfalls in funding from the State Budget by inflating figures for the number of children enrolled, official statistics should perhaps be treated with some caution.

**Vulnerable Families**

*"The main reason for this phenomenon is poverty,"* says Loze. *"As a result, children that should be enrolled into Auxiliary Boarding Schools remain outside the educational system."*

And, because salaries are low, there are few incentives for specially trained teachers to take up positions in schools that are meant to cater for children with special needs. Many Boarding Schools instead teach a curriculum designed for children with learning disabilities to those with no handicap at all. Yet, despite this, the Armenian Prime Minister, Andranik Markarian, reported to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg that there has been a 32% rise in the number of children admitted into Boarding Schools since 1991.

*"One mother visiting her son at a Boarding School in Yerevan described her frustration when she couldn't find work after the death of her husband during the [Karabagh] war and the anger she felt when her son had to be enrolled into a school designated for mentally handicapped children,"* says McCoy. *"She wasn't happy with the "watered-down" education he was receiving and said that if she had the means she would have taken him back years ago."*

*"During the Soviet era,"* he continues, *"children enrolled into residential institutions were looked upon as second-class citizens. This discouraged families from placing their children into Boarding Schools and Children's Homes but in today's Armenia this mentality has changed. Many directors now report that there is actually a waiting list for children to be admitted because of the present-day economic uncertainty."*

However, while Children's Homes in Armenia have received substantial support from the large Armenian Diaspora,

conditions in over fifty Boarding Schools have deteriorated considerably since independence. One Director, for example, is believed to keep conditions as bad as possible in order to attract extra finance from international organizations working in the Republic — money that the children will never see.

*"Mission East has stopped dealing with this Director completely because we understand that there is a greater incentive for him to keep conditions as they are,"* says Loze. *"Whatever resources directed to him will simply disappear."*

But Naira Avetisian, UNICEF's Child Protection Officer, is quick to point out that the staff at most boarding schools and children's homes in Armenia are genuinely concerned with the well-being of those entrusted into their care. *"However,"* she adds, *"the importance of strengthening vulnerable families by providing them with job opportunities has to be emphasized rather than supporting the institutions."*

But, with few exceptions, conditions in Armenia's Boarding Schools are poor, with international organizations having to operate feeding programs in some schools so that the children can at least receive their basic nutrition. The Armenian Relief Society (ARS), for example, operates three such feeding programs in Yerevan alone, but for the most part, children are undernourished. "*This can easily be observed in the faces and stature of most of these children,"* says McCoy. *"They are noticeably thin, have drawn faces and many are stunted in growth and small for their age. At the majority of boarding schools, the diet consists mainly of carbohydrates such as pasta, potatoes and bread while few can afford to serve fruit, vegetables or meat."*

**Single Parents**

Since Armenia declared its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, socio-economic conditions in the Republic have deteriorated. Even with recent economic growth, a combination of factors such as an unresolved war with Azerbaijan, economic blockade by Turkey, endemic corruption and increasing social inequality has led to the migration of at least one million Armenians to find work abroad.

And, despite the common misconception that most children placed into residential care in Armenia are orphans, few are abandoned or available for adoption. According to Avetisian, even in Children's Homes (commonly referred to as orphanages in the Diaspora) at least seventy percent have families they could return to if the socio-economic situation improved.

Many children instead come from single-parent households where the mother is divorced, widowed or separated from a husband working abroad or in prison. A Demographic and Health Survey (ADHS) held in 2000 estimates that 110,000 children in Armenia come from single-parent families out of approximately 500,000 children believed to be living in poverty.

*"There are many reasons why children with parents are deprived of parental care in Armenia,"* explains Avetisian. *"First of all there is poverty, then centralization of special education within the boarding school system and finally, the absence of alternatives and community-based support services for vulnerable families at risk. The majority of children in children's homes and boarding schools are not orphans. They have parents and the right to live with their families."*

But, while many organizations conclude that Armenia's Boarding Schools should be closed, such plans could create additional problems unless the root cause of the problem is addressed. UNICEF and the Armenian Ministry of the Interior estimate that there are as many as 400 children street children in Yerevan and numbers could increase if others are removed from care and effectively thrown out onto the streets.

Susanna Hayrapetian, Social Sector Operations Offer for the World Bank's Office in Yerevan, says that the international financial organization favors a phased approach as part of the Armenian Government's overall Poverty Reduction Strategy. *"It can't happen overnight,"* she explains. *"It needs special consideration and a transition phase of at least a year and a half."*

As a result, in a wide-ranging ten-year National Program for the Protection of Children's Rights in Armenia, the Armenian Government and NGOs working in this area propose introducing measures that will include steps taken to prevent the enrolment of children into boarding schools and the return of those already attending to their families.

*"It is extremely difficult to measure the impact that removing a child from their home environment has,"* says McCoy. *"And, although it is too early to substantiate claims that the well-being of children placed in residential care will be affected, it may very well take an entire generation before we fully understand the social and psychological ramifications of this phenomenon."*

*"However,"* he concludes, *"institutionalizing children only perpetuates the problem of social vulnerability in Armenia by seriously undermining the development of programs that could support the family and keep children out of institutions."*

# Yerevan Children's Home

The Yerevan Children's Home was founded in 1937 and accommodates children under the age of 5. It is also one of the main depositories for children waiting to be adopted. However, according to a recent report, most of the children are instead temporarily placed there predominantly by single mothers.

Unofficial data also suggests that of 114 children enrolled in the Children's home in 2002, only 41 were technically abandoned and legally available for adoption. The remainder come from socially vulnerable families.

# The Children of Kharberd

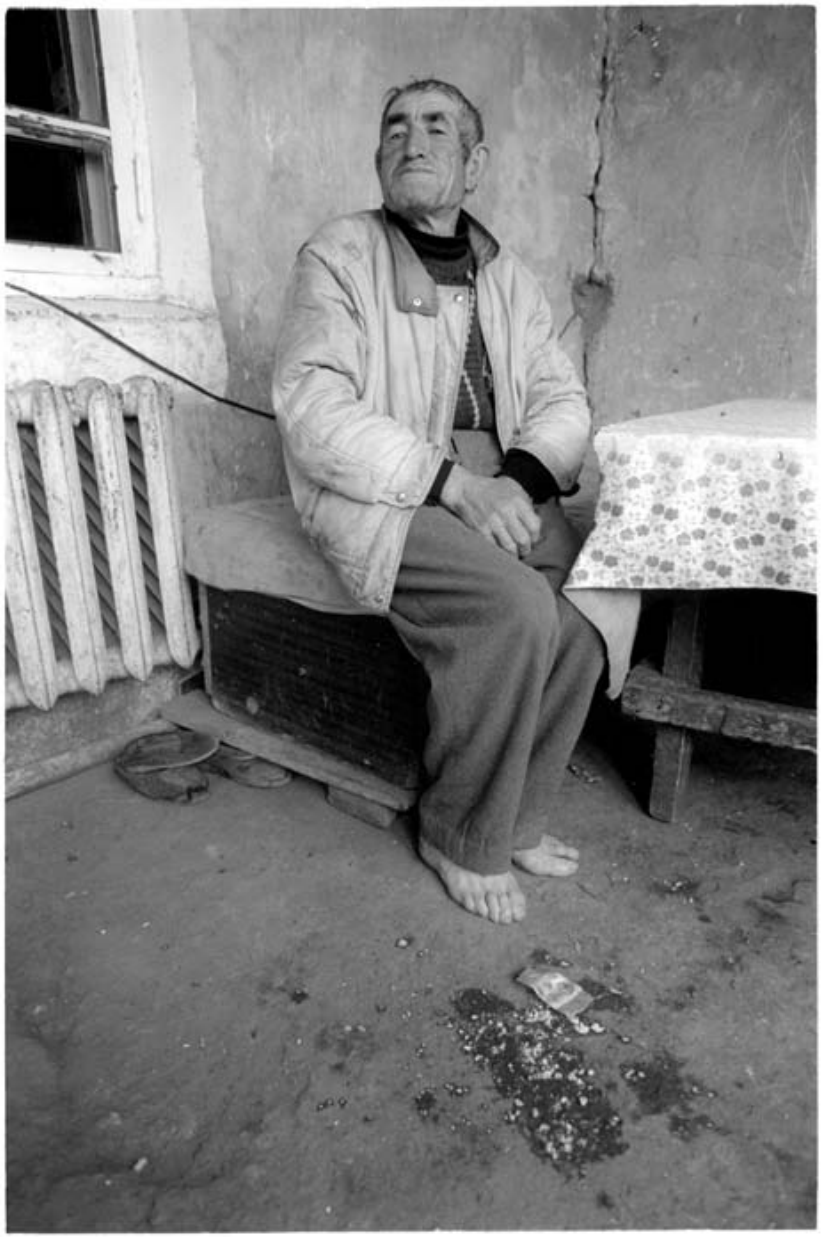
Two hundred children aged between six and eighteen inhabit the Specialized Children's Home in Nor Kharberd. All have varying degrees of mental and physical disabilities and only fifty percent are orphans or available for adoption.

Hit by scandal after scandal in the early 1990's, conditions at Kharberd have improved significantly in recent years thanks to local, foreign and Diasporan assistance. Even so, the future for the children is uncertain and Kharberd is over capacity.

# Far from the Madding Crowd

Accompanying the deterioration in living conditions in the Republic of Armenia has been a corresponding increase in psychiatric-neurological disorders such as alcoholism, drug addition and schizophrenia. Psychiatric patients, in particular, have been hit especially hard by the prevailing socio-economic situation.

Although organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Belgium) have started programs to encourage “care in the community,” conditions can be just as bad at home as they are in any institution.



# Life in No Man's Land

**LACHIN, Kashatagh Region — Anyone taking the road from Goris to Stepanakert has passed through Lachin, the strategic, main artery in the lifeline between Armenia and the self-declared Republic of Nagorno-Karabagh. Few actually visit the town now of course, perhaps unsurprisingly given the destruction evident throughout. The only interest for many passing through is that Lachin lies not in Karabakh, but within what the international community considers sovereign Azerbaijani territory.**

Conflict erupted over Nagorno Karabagh in 1988 after this tiny enclave, mainly inhabited by Christian Armenians but governed by Azerbaijan, demanded reunification with Armenia. Moslem Azerbaijan refused. At least 25,000 died during the following six years of fighting and 1 million were forced to flee their homes. By the time a ceasefire agreement was signed in May 1994, Armenian forces controlled 14 percent of Azerbaijan.

Most of the 700,000 Azeri refugees that ended up living in squalid camps in Azerbaijan come from territory outside of Karabagh proper, and for the international mediators charged with the task of finding a solution to the 13-year-old conflict, any settlement must include the return of refugees to their former homes. The reality at ground zero, however, is that those villages and towns have long since been razed.

For most Armenians, this bridge between Armenia and Karabagh is part of an ancient historical motherland usurped long ago from its rightful owners by nomadic Turkic interlopers and is being resettled. For many Azeris, however, this is their land, recognized internationally and seized illegitimately. Nearly eight years after the ceasefire, the issue still has the power to pull Azeris out onto the streets, demanding, as they have in recent years, that their government take military action to reclaim the territory.

**Into The Buffer Zone**

The daily van that departs for Lachin from Yerevan should make the trip in five hours but, driving at a snail's pace, it takes seven. The landscape is scenic but the journey arduous,

and the road itself says much about the region's recent history. After passing the border where Armenia theoretically ends, the road is immaculately asphalted but rubble from the war still lies strewn across the landscape. Further on, wires strung across the valley, originally intended to prevent low-flying helicopters from evading radar detection, still remain.

On the outskirts of Lachin, a recently constructed church belies the fact that this town, now renamed Berdzor, was once inhabited by at least 20,000 Azeris and Kurds. During the war, both sides pursued tactics designed to prevent inhabitants from returning to their homes and the destruction unleashed on Lachin was considerable. Houses are being rebuilt however, but this time for approximately 3,000 Armenians relocated in an effort to repopulate the region.

The aim is to increase the population of the unrecognized Republic from under 150,000 in 1994 to 300,000 by 2010 but given the size of Karabagh, it is hard to imagine that the plan does not also include towns such as Lachin that lie outside Karabagh proper in the buffer zone connecting the enclave to Armenia. Moreover, while the official line suggests that those relocating to Karabagh and elsewhere are Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan, the reality on the ground suggests otherwise.


Territories outside of Nagorno Karabagh under Armenian control

**New Arrivals**

Zoric Irkoian, for one, is not a refugee. Arriving six years ago from Yerevan, he openly admits that most of those inhabiting the disputed territory are from Armenia and that few refugees have joined the resettlement program. *"Not many came because they were used to their life in Baku and Sumgait [in Azerbaijan],"* explains Irkoian. *"Many now feel safer in Armenia, and like a million other Armenians, some have left for Russia."*

Not surprising, perhaps. What Irkoian, his wife and two young daughters have come to is a simple, virtually unfurnished shack. Chickens run free in the yard outside while a hole in the ground serves as the toilet for the entire family. Cooking is on a simple electric stove that just about manages to boil oriental coffee in 15 minutes and water collects every morning in the makeshift sink assembled outside.

An old, dilapidated television barely picks up Russian television, and Armenian TV broadcast from Yerevan is even worse. Homes like these are among the poorest to be found anywhere in the Caucasus and while life may be difficult throughout the region, things are even tougher in Lachin. Still, Irkoian does have a good job now, working as the chief education specialist for the local department of education, youth affairs, and sports.

The flag of the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabagh flies over his offices, a municipal building serving as the administrative center for most of the territory sandwiched between Armenia and Karabagh. Stretching from Lachin to the Iranian border, what has become known as the occupied territories in international circles is marked on Armenian maps

as Kashatagh, while to the north, Kelbajar is part of the New Shahumian region. For the traveler, though, only the rather insignificant border crossing indicates that this is not Armenia.

Irkoian's 45-minute journey to work takes him along terrible roads that are, in some places, nonexistent and as we pass the remains of devastated and derelict buildings, Irkoian admits that while conditions are bad, there are plenty more waiting to come. Approximately fifteen thousand Armenians already live in Kashatagh, and buses bring the new arrivals to Lachin every week to claim social benefits dispensed from the window of the building opposite.

It would seem that for many in Armenia, conditions can be even worse, but in Lachin virtually everyone has work. Schools and other social services have been established to cater to the needs of the settlers and there is also the lure of other benefits. Anyone intending to relocate to Kashatagh receives financial incentives, cattle and livestock worth about $240, land and a ruined Azeri home that they can call their own.

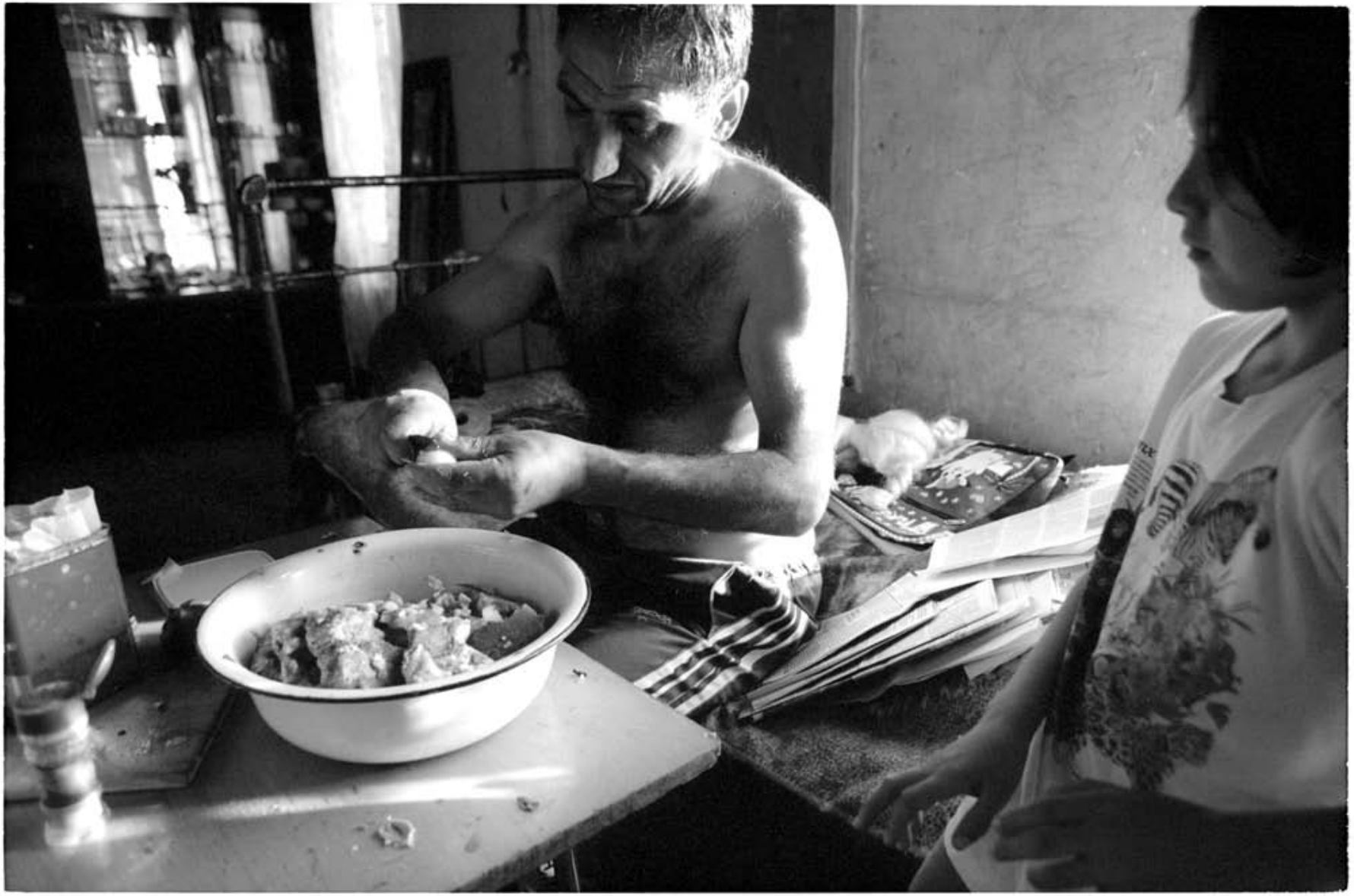
None of that influenced Irkoian's decision to resettle here, he says. Part of the military force that seized the town 10 years earlier, he considers it his duty. *"It was our dream to liberate Lachin and when I heard that there were schools in the liberated territories that needed specialists, I decided to move. If we were occupying someone else's land, I wouldn't have come but there are churches and monuments destroyed by the Azeris everywhere."*

*"While those who once lived here could say they that were fighting for their birthplace,"* he continues, *"they could not say that they were fighting for their historical motherland. If some Azeris wanted to return we might consider giving them homes, but they don't."* Irkoian adds that he even keeps the photograph of the former occupants of the home he has since rebuilt. *"They looked like normal people,"* he admits.

**Future Perfect?**

The sound of construction work can be heard throughout Lachin and there are even two markets, dozens of small shops, and a cafe. The shops may carry the names of regions long since lost to Turkey, but somewhat ironically, there are dozens of boxes of Azeri tea (Azerçay) imported via Georgia on the shelves. Irkoian says that he has *"no problem with establishing cultural or economic contact with the Azeris."*

In contrast, Calouste, a 39-year-old former computer programmer from the Bangladesh district of Yerevan who opened a grocery store in Lachin four years ago, says that if



there were enough Armenian goods to sell, he wouldn't stock a single imported item. That is his goal, he explains, and when that happens, everything will be perfect.

Life may not yet meet Calouste's definition of perfection and there is much hardship here, but there is a sense that Lachin is developing into a community although, of course, nothing is ever that simple in the Caucasus. With salaries low throughout the region, many still buy goods on credit. One customer has come in that day to settle his account, handing 6,000 Armenian dram (about $12) over the counter while Calouste's sister crosses his name off a list that stretches several pages.

Another waits in line to buy vodka and wine while Calouste encourages him to buy goods produced in Armenia from a selection largely made up of imported items. He already offers bottles of wine named after the disputed city of Shushi in Karabagh, along with Armenian cigarettes, vodka, light bulbs, chocolate, ice cream, and fruit juices. There is even talk of growing tobacco close to Lachin to supply cigarette manufacturers in Armenia.

*"We don't want help,"* he says, apologizing that he's a nationalist. *"If Armenians in the Diaspora just send us money, we'll forget how to help ourselves."*

**Present Imperfect**

The next day, Irkoian takes me northward in the direction of Herik, formerly the Azeri village of Ahmadlu. Until around 1918, when the Azeris came and displaced its Armenian population, it was the Armenian village of Hayri. Herik lies 50 kilometers along a road that passes the fifth-century Armenian monastery of Tsitsernavank, but it seems like more than 200. Meandering through a pastoral scene that contrasts sharply with the sight of towns and villages long since razed to the ground, cows brought over the border with Armenia now graze among the ruins.

In these parts, it is not always easy to talk, like Calouste, of self-sufficiency. In Melikashen, a small village not far from Lachin, one family invites us in for coffee. Amid the dirt and dilapidation of their new home, "repossessed" from its former owners, the new arrivals explain that the Armenian diaspora must invest in these new communities while Irkoian is more interested in validating Armenian claims to this land by taking me to see an old Armenian castle. An Azeri house has been built into its side.

Behind the remains of an Armenian stone cross now broken in two, pigs are herded into an outhouse while an old woman skins the head of a slaughtered sheep on the balcony above.

Her husband invites us in, insisting, as duty demands, that we have some tan, a drink similar to yogurt, before we leave. A passing car throws up a cloud of dust, momentarily obscuring the view.

The next stop on a road that takes us past the remains of Azeri villages, towns, cemeteries, and the occasional Armenian monastery perched high overhead is Moshatagh. The village head, another new arrival from Jermuk, once a popular tourist destination in Armenia, sits with his family of eight on the veranda of their new home. His four-wheel drive is needed to make the journey to Herik, high in the surrounding hills, but even then, the twisting, narrow road will be difficult.

Upon our arrival, children in threadbare clothing clamor to have their photographs taken outside the 16th-century church that the Azeris once used as a cattle shed. Conditions must have been significantly worse in Armenia for families to consider relocating to Herik. There are no telephones, and water has to be collected from a hosepipe that serves as the irrigation system for the entire village. Irkoian says that 50 percent of the villages now being resettled have no electricity.

And for some, the conditions are too hard. Another family invites us in. Their living conditions are the worst I have seen anywhere. They have decided enough is enough and have since moved their seven children to Lachin as the winter set in. Another family from the thirteen who originally came here has also left. Others, however, are more resilient and defiant. Feasting on barbecue and lamb stew, dozens sit around plastic sheets that serve as makeshift tablecloths. The vodka flows as freely as the nearby river, and toasts made by former fighters still in uniform are simple and to the point. For them, this is Armenian land, and it will never be given back.

**Future Imperfect?**

Their toasts may be defiant, but there is a fear that gnaws the villagers as they eat — that Armenian President Robert Kocharian might make concessions in order to bring much-

needed stability and economic investment to the region. Reports from Key West, Florida, where the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) attempted to broker an agreement, worry them.

So too do reports suggesting that in order to restart the peace process after it stalled, Armenia would have to first withdraw its troops from these territories and return the land to Azerbaijan. The aim may be peace, but such talk could bring the sides closer to war again. Nationalists in both Armenia and Azerbaijan have already said they would rather resume hostilities than concede any territory to the other, and when Vardan Oskanian, Armenia's Foreign Minister, referred to Kashatagh as "occupied," many deputies in the Armenian National Assembly instead called for his resignation.

Echoing these sentiments, Irkoian says he would refuse to leave. *"Some might have moved here because of the social conditions in Armenia,"* he says, *"but others did not. I can't guarantee that I will always live in Lachin, but there is a connection with this land. It is our life, and if we lose that, there is nothing. While I am not saying that everybody will fight again, at least thirty percent would. Nobody can tell us what to do — not even the Americans."*

*"There could be concessions from some parts of Fizuli and Aghdam,"* he continues, *"but anyone who knows this territory understands that nothing else can be returned. In my opinion, not one centimeter should be given back. If we return anything, we will again be risking the security of Armenians living in Karabagh. The most effective peacekeeping force is our own."*

Further south, Razmik Kurdian, an Armenian from Lebanon who heads the tiny village of Ditsmayri situated between Zangelan and the Iranian border, puts it more bluntly. *"This land was paid for in blood, and will only be given back with blood,"* he says, in between impromptu renditions of old nationalist songs glorifying victories over the Turks. *"If anyone ever thought of returning this land, they would be betraying the memory of those that died."*

For Irkoian, Kurdian, and many others, therefore, this land will always be Armenian but while they admit that small pockets of territory outside Nagorno-Karabagh proper — in particular Aghdam and Fizuli — could conceivably be given back, it is unlikely that Azerbaijan and the international mediators will ever consider any of this land as Armenian. For the peacemakers, then, conflicting claims to the land that lies between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh could prove as sensitive an issue as the status of Karabagh itself.

# Clearing the Killing Fields

**GYULABLY, Azerbaijan - A few kilometers from the border of the officially unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabagh, a shepherd sits with his grazing cattle in the lush pastures of Karabagh-controlled Azerbaijan. The scene could grace the front of any postcard from the scenic Caucasus.**

The twisted carcasses of rusting vehicles along the roadside tell a different story, though. The shepherd is sitting in a minefield.

A blast resonates in the distance as a newly discovered, booby-trapped TM-57 anti-tank mine is detonated, but it doesn't seem to rattle the shepherd or his herd. Along the road, a mine-clearance team from the HALO Trust has already uncovered 17 anti-personnel and three anti-tank mines.

Armen Harutyunian, assistant operations manager for the British charity, says that as many as 200 mines still remain in an area covering just 500 square meters. Ten years have passed since an armistice brought peace to Nagorno-Karabagh, the largely Armenian-populated territory in Azerbaijan that demanded reunification with Armenia, sparking a war that claimed more than 25,000 lives. Since the 1994 ceasefire, however, the HALO Trust estimates that incidents with landmines and unexploded ordinance (UXO) have caused more than 900 deaths and injuries.

And while that may sound insignificant compared to the thousands who have died as a result of landmines in other war zones, there is concern that casualty figures will increase over time. Continual shifts in the front line have left the land littered with minefields and UXO.

Although the HALO Trust initially started work in Karabagh in 1995, it wasn't until five years later that it started to clear the disputed territory of UXO. Delayed by the need to map out locations, the charity finally started the work of clearing mines in late 2001 after international donor organizations such as USAID provided financial support.

The number of civilian personnel jumped from 28 to 133 — including three Battle Area Clearance [BAC] teams, two survey teams, and three teams of mine-clearers — and the Trust bought dozens of new vehicles, including ambulances, trucks,

and a large armored tractor that can literally roll over mines that can't be cleared manually.

But even though the harsh winter slowed down their work, the organization managed to destroy over 250 mines during the first few months of 2002, says Shane Pritchard, Program Manager for the HALO Trust in Karabagh. *"There aren't mines everywhere but it's obvious that there are likely to be many in areas where fighting took place,"* he explains.

*"There are also mines in a number of 'green areas' that were formerly Azeri villages in between Karabagh and the frontline which are now being resettled [by Armenians]. We can remove the threat before people hurt themselves."*

**No Man's Land**

Beyond the threat they pose to human life, landmines and UXO damage people's livelihood. Between the towns of Askeran and Aghdam, the discovery of a minefield has frustrated plans to construct a water pipeline to the nearby village of Khrmort and the HALO Trust has been called in to clear the area. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, 50 million square meters of arable land and more than 80,000 square meters of vineyards are unusable. Much of this land used to be among the most fertile acreage in the Republic but now, much of it has turned fallow. In all, 150 million square meters of land, roads, and forests need to be surveyed for mine clearance operations in Karabagh.

Mels Hakobjanian, head of the Mine Awareness Working Group (MAWG), which coordinates mine and UXO activities for the Nagorno-Karabagh government, agrees that the problem is serious. The map on his desk identifies regional centers such as Askeran, Mardakert, Martuni, and Hadrout as most at risk, but these are only the areas authorities know about.

*"There are over 15,000 hectares of minefields in Karabagh,"* Hakobjanian says from his dilapidated government office overlooking the central square in the self-declared Republic's capital, Stepanakert. *"Only 500 hectares have been cleared and it is very difficult to figure out where the rest of the mines are,"* he continues. *"Even around Shushi, which is supposed to be clear, a car was recently blown up by an anti-tank mine."*

**Mine Awareness**

In November 2001, two Soviet-made cluster bombs were discovered in Stepanakert and quickly disposed of. Hundreds of these fragmentation devices have been found in the capital since 1994 and the HALO Trust estimates that least 10,000 mines laid by both sides require urgent attention if accidents are to be prevented in the future.

Largely due to the clearance work of the HALO Trust — as well as information campaigns run by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) — casualties from incidents involving landmines and UXO have been steadily decreasing. In 1995, soon after the cease-fire agreement, there were 64 landmine casualties; in 1999, 30 people — over half of them children — were injured or killed. In 2002, casualties declined further: 14 injured and four deaths — none of them children.

*"Our educational program targets 228 schools and an estimated 22,000 children in Karabagh, as well as Lachin and Kelbajar,"* says Christopher Mehley, head of the ICRC office in Stepanakert. *"In conjunction with the Ministry of Education, mine awareness is now integrated into the school curriculum and the effectiveness of this program has been clearly demonstrated."*

Still, those engaged in mine clearance are clearly running a race against time. The relatively low number of casualties is as much tied to the area's small size but with plans to increase the population of Karabagh to 300,000 by 2010 that may all change. *"A peace deal will be signed one day,"* adds Simon Porter, former program manager for the HALO Trust in Nagorno Karabagh, *"and we are in the perfect situation to tackle the problem sooner rather than later. Otherwise, there will be significant problems when villagers attempt to farm their land, or when refugees and Internally Displaced People [IDPs] return to their homes."*

**All Quiet on the Eastern Front**

In the first of six operations to save her upper arm, the bone in Armine's elbow was removed. The ten-year-old hadn't even been born when conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out over Nagorno Karabagh and had barely turned two by the time an armistice was signed in 1994. Nevertheless, one year after the ceasefire, the conflict claimed another victim. Armine however, doesn't want to talk about it.

Her mother though, says that when a group of civilians ran into a landmine in an attempt to escape cross-border gunfire, Armine was caught in the blast. Shrapnel from the explosion ripped through her right arm and across her chest, scarring and disabling her for life.

She still suffers from nervous anxieties and depression today. Tim Straight, Head of the Norwegian Refugee Council in Armenia, stumbled upon Armine three years ago. *"If she doesn't get proper examination and a plan for treatment soon, her muscles which are functioning minimally now, will wither and her arm may have to be amputated,"* he says. *"This means she will never marry or attain any social status. This is a catastrophe for her whole life."*

But while the concern is genuine, the issue is more than just that of one little girl living in a remote corner of Armenia. According to official statistics, over 70,000 people, including an undetermined number of refugees, have been displaced from the border as a result of the war. Although Nagorno Karabagh might seem a world away from the idyllic forests of Tavoush in

north eastern Armenia, local residents nevertheless paid a price.

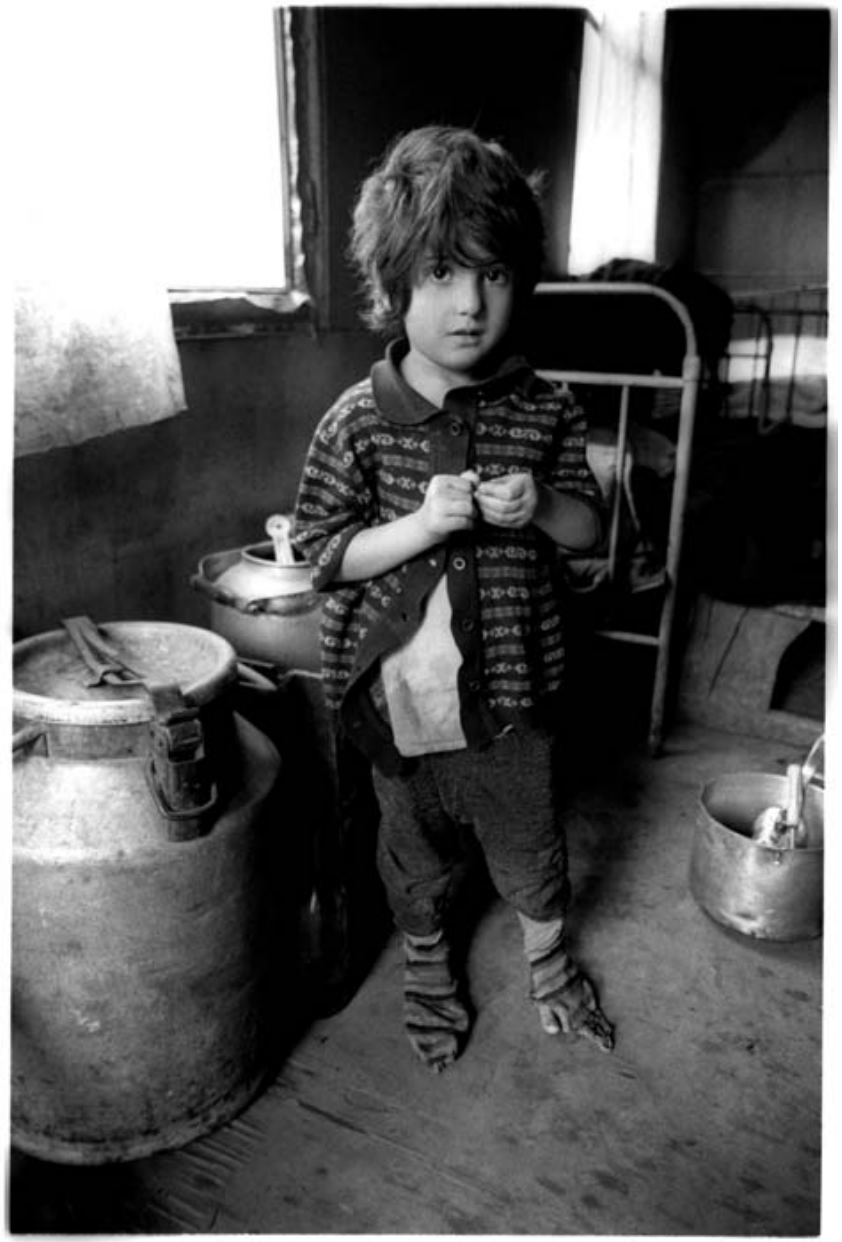
Whole villages situated along the Armenian border were reduced to rubble by incessant shelling and landmines situated along the 900 kilometer border with Azerbaijan have resulted in over seventy casualties in the Tavoush region alone. Eighteen people have been killed and eleven wounded by incidents with landmines in the Ararat region.

Further south in Siunik, there have been over thirty deaths and forty-four injuries since 1994. The Armenian military conducted partial mine clearance in the region until 1999 when material and technical resources ran out.

**Rehabilitation of the Border Regions**

Because those displaced by cross-border skirmishes, landmines and poor socio-economic conditions have found temporary accommodation in nearby villages, the low visibility of the problem has manifested itself as a lack of attention. The Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Internally Displaced People (IDPs), Dr. Francis Deng, highlighted those concerns when he visited Armenia in May 2000.

Gagik Yeganian, Head of the State Department for Migration and Refugees, says that for the past two years, authorities have started to take the matter seriously. *"On 14 December 2000, a plan for the Post Conflict Rehabilitation of the Bordering Territories of the Republic of Armenia was approved by the Government,"* he says. More than 23,000 houses, 78 education centers, 62 medical centers, 512km of potable and 724km of irrigation pipes, and 575km of roads were damaged by cross-border shelling and the total cost to rehabilitate the border is estimated at over $80 million. Under the Government initiative, an estimated 39,000 people will return to their homes and



conditions for 28,000 who have returned already will be improved.

However, the regional authorities estimate that as much as 9,000 hectares of Tavoush is mined, fuelling concerns that the landmine problem in Armenia is greater than many realize. According to Jemma Hasratian of the Armenian National Committee of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), it is difficult to fully estimate the extent of the problem given that both regular and irregular forces were responsible for laying mines and few accurate maps exist. *"Nobody knows how many mines there are,"* she says, *"but we're working with the figure of 50,000."*

**Mine Clearance**

Although Armenia and Azerbaijan were prevented from receiving US military assistance while the dispute over Nagorno Karabagh remained unresolved, the embargo was officially lifted on 29 March 2002 after both countries offered their assistance to the United States following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

On 16 March 2002, a US-financed demining center to train military personal opened in Etchmiadzin, twenty minutes from

the Armenian capital. Lieutenant-Colonel Eric von Tersch, military attache at the US Embassy in Yerevan, however, says that the center would have opened regardless of the war in Afghanistan and heightened American interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

A year and a half earlier, Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian soldiers had already simultaneously trained in humanitarian mine clearance at a military base in the Republic of Georgia under the "Beecroft Initiative," a confidence and security building measure aimed at preventing injuries and deaths from landmines in the south Caucasus.

*"We really had the parameters of this going before the attacks,"* explains von Tersch. *"What 9/11 did was show that there was a common interest here and in the United States. Our common goals became much more obvious after 11 September and there was an increased level of trust on both sides. There was simply greater momentum."*

US military assistance totaling $4.3 million was allocated to the Armenian Government after sanctions against Azerbaijan were suspended but the cost of the demining center was financed separately. Training is facilitated through the RONCO Consulting Corporation and the US military.

Start-up and operating costs for the first year of operation stood at $2.1 million. Eighty conscript soldiers man the base and receive an additional stipend of $10 a month on top of their $3 a month salaries. Lloyd Carpenter, one of RONCO's staff members in Armenia, says that eventually, the demining center should become self-sustainable through contributions from the international donor community and the Armenian Diaspora.

Although Armenia has not acceded to the International Mine Ban Treaty while the conflict over Nagorno Karabagh remains unresolved, the Government has nonetheless started to gather information on the arable and pasture land, orchards, and woodland affected. Von Tersch, however, is keen to stress that the main priority for the demining center will be the safety of civilians in mine-affected areas.

*"Because it's a sensitive issue, it's not our intention to push anyone into demining defensive positions,"* he says. *"We are concerned with humanitarian demining and are working with the military to develop the capacity to go into civilian areas in cooperation with the regional authorities to pull those mines out."*

# Revolution in Georgia: What Next for Armenia?

**YEREVAN, Armenia -- When Mikhail Saakashvili, the newly elected President of the Republic of Georgia, forced his way into Parliament in November 2003, sealing the fate of his predecessor, there were few analysts that didn't examine what impact the "Rose Revolution" might have on neighboring Republics.**

Since Azerbaijan showed no sign of any increased political activity, all attention soon turned to Armenia where in April 2004, the opposition took to the streets in an attempt to replicate events in Georgia. Thousands rallied to call for the resignation of the Armenian President, Robert Kocharian, re-elected for a second term in deeply flawed elections held the previous year.

At first, however, there were more immediate concerns. Land-locked and blockaded by Turkey and Azerbaijan, approximately ninety percent of all Armenian trade goes through its northern neighbor and had trade-routes been affected, it would have spelt disaster for the poverty-stricken Republic. Although there has been economic growth in recent years, it has mainly benefited those closest to the ruling regime.

Half the population lives below the national poverty line and over one million Armenians have left the country to find work and a better life abroad. Corruption is endemic and the rule of law has deteriorated.

Inspired by the November events in Georgia, therefore, the first demonstration held by an opposition party in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, took place on 5 April almost a year after President Robert Kocharian's controversial inauguration. But whereas the former President of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, was reluctant to use force to suppress protests in Tbilisi, the Armenian President was not.

More than a dozen shaven-head thugs, believed to be the bodyguards of oligarchs close to the authorities, threw eggs at opposition figures and attacked journalists, smashing the cameras of photographers and film crews. However, the worst was yet to come. In the early hours of 13 April, after 15,000 opposition supporters marched on the Presidential Palace only to be halted in their tracks by razor wire blocking the road, a core group of 2-3,000 camped overnight on Yerevan's central Marshal Baghramian Avenue.

At 2am, water cannon and stun grenades were used to disperse peaceful demonstrators who were then ambushed by groups of riot police waiting for them as they fled the scene. According to eye witness accounts, the Deputy Head of the Armenian Police, Hovannes Varian, personally beat one photographer, Hayk Gevorkian, from the pro-opposition Haykakan Zhamanak newspaper. Other journalists including a Russian TV cameraman were also attacked.

Hundreds of opposition activists, including two opposition MPs, were detained and others allegedly tortured in custody. As was the case during and immediately after the 2003 Presidential Elections, freedom of movement in the Republic was restricted and roads into the capital were blocked in order to prevent supporters from the regions attending these and later rallies.

As a result, Human Rights Watch and the Council of Europe issued a stern warning to the Armenian Government that a repeat of such an incident would be unacceptable. They also demanded the immediate release of more than a dozen leading activists whom human rights activists considered political prisoners. The request, however, fell on deaf ears.

But despite the perseverance of the opposition, many analysts conclude that attempts to remove Kocharian from power were doomed from the outset. Despite his unpopularity in Georgia,

Shevardnadze was nonetheless more democratic than his Armenian counterpart who many consider authoritarian and ruthless in comparison.

But the reasons for the failure of the opposition to achieve regime change in Armenia go far deeper than that. One other factor has been the lack of any political figure with the charisma and credibility of Mikhail Saakashvili, the new President of Georgia. Kocharian's main opponent in the 2003 Presidential Elections, for example, was Stepan Demirchian, son of the former communist-era boss of Armenia.

Although Demirchian has the support of some part of the population at least, he lacked the oratory skills and experience of other less popular but more dynamic figures in the opposition such as Artashes Geghamian of the National Unity Party and Aram Z. Sargsian of the Republic Party. Even today, Demirchian remains in the background at opposition rallies, allowing others to take center stage. And whereas Shevardnadze was reliant on the United States to maintain power, Moscow rules the roost in Armenia.

However, while attempts to unseat the Armenian President will prove an uphill struggle, street demonstrations are set to continue. Moreover, as the situation remains unpredictable, it is not impossible that regime change could happen in Armenia. At the very least, recent events in Georgia have contributed to the emergence of an active opposition for the first time since 1996 and civil rights activists are finding a new lease of life.

Furthermore, in a few years, Armenia will find itself in the exact same situation that gave birth to the Georgian "Rose Revolution" with Parliamentary Elections scheduled for 2007 determining the outcome of Presidential Elections to be held the following year. Although it is not unthinkable that President Kocharian might attempt to run for a third term in office in 2008, he is prohibited from doing so under the Armenian Constitution.

In the meantime then, current events in Armenia can perhaps best be viewed in the context of both the government and opposition preparing for an inevitable change of power that will have to occur by 2008 at the very latest. Until then, leading human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and the Committe to Protect Journalists are already warning that democracy, human rights and media freedoms are already in decline as a direct result of the ruling regime's attempt to cling on to power.

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**This book is dedicated to my son, David Krikorian.**

**Photographs:**